

THE BLESSINGS OF DARKNESS

Before we know it, Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, will be upon us. Plus Hanukkah and Christmas, both festivals of intense luminosity, lie just around the corner. Now, given the convergence of these three holy seasons, you'd normally be hearing a sermon on the wonders of light, right?

I mean, I've preached dozens of such sermons in my career, so I could do it again, but this morning, I want to throw something of a curveball. Not a nasty one, but a tantalizing curveball which every one of us is capable of hitting.

Here's my Sunday pitch: only when we dare to welcome, then embrace, the blessings of darkness, will we become truly mature religious pilgrims.

The Enlightenment has unquestionably rendered all of us in Western civilization citizens of the light. The invention of the light bulb—followed by neon lights and handy light switches—was a marvelous outgrowth of the enlightenment's technological achievements. Consequently, religion has become very light-oriented in the West.

You may be familiar with the ancient tale of the slightly inebriated man on his hands and knees underneath a street lamp searching the sidewalk. A friend comes by and says, "Ralph, what in the world are you doing out here on your hands and knees?"

"Well, I'm hunting for my house key," Ralph replied. "I lost my house key." The friend got down on his hands and knees too. "Show me where you lost it, and I'll help you," he said. "Oh, I lost it way over there in the grass," Ralph said. "Then, why in the world are you looking for it out here on the sidewalk?" the friend asked. "Well, because this is where the light is!"

I've a strong feeling that a lot of folks come to our Fellowship, particularly this season of the year, because somehow, somewhere we've lost something. Maybe we're not even sure what we've lost or where we've lost it, but we're convinced that a religious community might just be where the light is. After all, it's been proven that there are three main reasons people pursue our liberal religion: hurt, home, and hope...in short, in seeking a good congregational fit, we're often negotiating some sort of hurt and desire a home of hope—reasonable not fanciful hope.

Yes, yes, yes, we're a place and people where the light is; stick around for awhile at UUFSD, and you'll be sure to find lots of illumination. But our open-minded, life-affirming religion challenges us to experience the blessings of endarkenment as well as reap the riches of enlightenment. Both/and. We're both/andians around here!

During the December holidays, let's face it, we tend to rush to light candles, growing addicted to the blaze of tinsel and ornaments. We're prone to an easy, quick conversion of this darkening time of the year into harried rituals and compulsive partying. Alas, we're prone to smother anything dark in a blaze of light.

But, friends, we pay a price for our light-binge. We grow lopsided, whenever we embrace light and banish darkness—when, in truth, both realities can deliver wisdom and meaning straight to the heart of our lives. I believe that human existence is incorrigibly water and soil, masculine and feminine, sorrow and joy, light and dark and our task as humans is to explore the ranges of the entire continuum rather than gravitate to one cozy, comfortable corner of reality. As my tennis buddy puts it: “Tom, there's a yin and yang to every **thang!**”

Or in more formal religious language, the Hebrew scriptures remind us: “And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” Therefore, each 24-hour sweep is unified, of a whole. Light and dark, day and night are merely different seasons, comprising the entire mysterious reality we designate as life. Therefore, a light-dominated spirituality is superficial, thin,

incomplete: lacking the deep, dark roots that nourish and ground the large trees. The truth is, we'll never quite mature spiritually, if we always try to live with the lights on.

The treasures of the dark are many; let me share but a few this morning.

First off, we all began in the dark. Our parents presumably conceived us in the dark nights of their love-making. Furthermore, we lived apparently quite contented lives for nine full months in the dark. The womb was dark yet not fearful. Enormous deepening will come to us if we take time to pay homage to our dark and silent origins. Think of the births of Moses and Jesus, Esther and Mary this way as well. And seeds underground are growing in the dark no less than the fetus in the mother's womb.

Now look at the cosmos. In the creation story, when darkness was on the face of the deep, the Eternal Spirit moved there, brooding over the face of the waters. From this dark starting point, Yahweh fashioned the whole earth. You see, much of the birth of our universe itself was done in the dark; for the sun hasn't always existed.

All mystery is about the dark, but the Enlightenment left us with the pernicious notion that our human role was to *conquer* mystery itself, just as we're supposed to conquer the land, the animals, the ocean, other people, even our feelings. Consequently, we humans have been robbed of savoring mystery and surrendering to its darkness. Never forget: in mystery we're born, in mystery we live, and in mystery we die.

And think of our bodies. Our livers, our hearts, our intestines, our brains, all the wondrous and usually harmonious working parts of our bodies, go about their business, at night and during the day, completely in the dark. Ponder that reality during these holy days and be appreciative, feel blessed. Say daily words of thanks for each of your organs, one by one, those functioning just fine and those seeming to struggle. They're all gifts and doing their jobs out of sight, in pitch darkness.

Folks, as Solstice approaches, I charge you to seize some time, daily, a few minutes will suffice (no need to compete with either yogis or monks), and sit in the dark—alone, quiet, and still—consciously blessing all that grows in the dark.

For the December dark, dank, and cold—even in sunshiny San Diego—harbingers a time for productive spiritual brooding. In the midst of all the holiday hysteria, when everyone’s romping around in a commercialized frenzy, winter reminds us to slow down, turn around, focus inward and weigh what truly matters in our lives. Come to your senses. Find your mind. Visit your soul.

Winter is traditionally thought of as a low-energy period, a time even of despondency. Yet this dark season of the year, when we don’t run from it but rather surrender to it, can be a rare time of internal renewal and deepening. Have you noticed: in winter time, we can better hear the pounding of our very hearts, for there’s more silence all around?

So, I urge you to pay your interior castle a long-overdue visit, travel toward the primal, the instinctive, the earthy. Down, down, down, back, back, back...use this season to connect with your core, your essence, your dark, deeper being.

I believe that the darkness also calls us to the honor our shadows. The shadow is a Jungian concept usually referring to the unknown, the repressed or unacknowledged parts of ourselves. These are often “negative” traits such as selfishness or meanness that don’t fit how we like to see ourselves. Hence, this season is the time for us to honor our shadows, make sufficient peace with some of the beasts lurking in our inner depths, where our beings aren’t sunlit.

The shadow also includes the unacknowledged “positive” parts of our beings. Most of us aren’t conditioned to claim our own beauty or our potential to be creative, to love, to heal. These hidden virtues often reside in the dark recesses of our beings, and during December need to be called forth and shared.

Simply remember that the dark season of the year is a time of hibernation for both the plant and the animal world. It should also be a quiet time, an inward time, a time of gathering energy and strength for human beings as well.

So, I ask you: what is it that you need to brood about or wrestle with in the silence and darkness of your solitary soul? Whatever it may be, I summon you to travel beneath the cheap glare of the season and dive deeply into your darkness...and emerge as a more expansive person.

Furthermore, it seems to me to be a wise season to recall the importance of helping our own offspring as well as the children of our Fellowship, to better acclimate themselves to life's insistent darkness.

From the moment children leave the womb and enter daylight, they experience an abundance of fears born of imagination and reality. We older, more experienced life-travelers need to help the little ones confront their fears rather than be overwhelmed by them. Often in a well-intentioned yet futile effort to rid children of natural anxiety, nervous adults flood their lives with artificial, overpowering light, when we'd do better to assist them in finding their way amidst the physical and moral dark that will accompany them all their days...and nights.

The darkness need not destroy anyone, young or old. In fact, it won't. Just as Moses saw Yahweh in the light and lived, so we can face the mysterious, scary, healing darkness and live. There's a poignant observation by the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno who pondered Goethe's dying words about "Light, more light." Unamuno responded by saying, "No, not more light, but more warmth. We die of cold not of darkness. It's the frost that kills and not the night."

But, let's be honest, sometimes life's emptiness seems overwhelming, and we get lost in it. Whether in our own family or in the larger community, there exist lots of hurting people who could sure use some CPR (a "compassionate, personal response"), who could benefit from someone willing to listen to, even shoulder for a spell, some of their despond.

So I invite you to find ways during these very holidays to companion folks struggling in emotional and financial darkness: to help them not just with money or canned goods, both of which are necessary, but be willing to care, sing, serve the lost and least upclose. Dare to touch those who are seldom touched, dare to make visible those who are perennially invisible to human sight and care.

I'll never forget the story one of our members at First Church told about her young son serving and sharing a meal with the homeless, on our premises, awhile back:

As we cooks worked in the kitchen, my son, Aaron, wandered around the tables in the Common Room, a little bored until he spied a deck of cards. And in the open and bold manner of a nine-year old, he looked up and asked the guests, 'Does anybody here know how to play poker?'. Chuckling, a group formed, playing and arguing about my son's arbitrary rule-making.

*When supper was ready, Aaron came over to me with a puzzled look and asked quietly, 'Mom, aren't we going to wait for the homeless people?' And I responded, 'Honey, these **are** the homeless people!' Then he said, in a hushed voice, 'But, Mom, they look just like everybody else!'*

And I knew then I'd given my son a gift more precious than anything I'd ever put under the tree. Many weeks later, on rainy nights, we wondered aloud if some of his poker partners had a dry place to sleep. Now, you see, for our family, homelessness is no longer a social problem. It has names and faces.

Yes, homelessness is real, so is depression, so is death. And during the holidays the darkness is often magnified, and the best we humans can do is huddle close, hold one another, and, when blessed, be lovingly carried to the other side.

A few years ago, our beloved sister-in-law, Sue Manley died suddenly of a brain aneurysm, at the age of 60. It was in mid-December, just as we were all (Sue particularly, for she was a guiding spirit in the celebrations of our clan) readying ourselves for the manifold delights of the holidays. Shocked, we surrounded her hospital bed, where she lay unconscious. We wept and prayed, gnashed our teeth and soothed her brow, shook our souls in dismay while paying homage to her extraordinarily positive life. There was seldom a more consistently, upbeat human being than Mary Sue Manley: sister, partner, step-mother, aunt, colleague, and friend.

She simply epitomized our Unitarian Universalist faith at its finest: for Sue knew in the marrow of her soul that we belonged to a Love that will never let us *go*, will never let us *down*, and will never let us *off*, and she tried to embody such love, day in and day out.

So, it wasn't out of character that, late the very afternoon of Sue's death, most of our family, children included, left the hospital to attend Dr. Seuss's uplifting musical *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. Sue had been instrumental in coordinating the excursion; clearly, she would have wanted us to go, indeed we felt her palpable presence throughout the play. We still do.

I want to close with a poignant story that always brings both comfort and challenge to my spirit during this darkening time of the year. Perhaps it will inspire you as well.

There exists a most unusual crèche, where the little carved figures aren't painted, but made of different colors of woods. One of the wise men, for example, wears a gown in pale ivory that falls in curved folds around his brown feet. There's power and vitality and grace in the carving of each and every figure. The crèche is from Africa.

And more than that, the woods aren't mahogany or rosewood, as you might think at a glance. For these figures are carved, you see, from thorns from the egun tree in Nigeria. They're big thorns, very wide at the base, but sharply narrowing, and they grow in the three colors used in the crèche.

How strange yet fitting to carve something beautiful out of light and dark thorns, especially for a holiday that's the epitome of "coziness." But carving Christmas from thorns, think of it; isn't that the way life often arrives, during this dank and darkening season?

Perhaps your thorn is the death of a loved one, and this may be the first holiday without them. Or your thorn is someone having moved away. A severed relationship, a new illness

diagnosed, a weary and worn-out soul: all these and countless other conditions can represent piercing thorns.

So we huddle every Sunday in holy homes of hope, like our Fellowship, to create something beautiful and healing with our thorns. Alone, the task would prove daunting; but nestled in this beloved community, miracles happen, darkness delivers strange and wondrous gifts, the thorniest of thorns can be transformed.

I know that to be true, and so do you.

Tom Owen-Towle
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